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Contemporary American Immigrant Literature

What constitutes contemporary American immigrant literature? To explore this question, we need to start by considering significant shifts in global migration in the latter half of the twentieth century as well as in American immigration policy. The first major period of immigration to the Unites States, in the conventional sense of the term (that is, if we do not consider the forced migration of Africans or the settler/colonial European experience), began in the late 1840s and came to a climax in the 1880s, when the number of immigrants was more than 5 million. As S. Shankar and Louis Mendoza note, the majority of these immigrants, "leaving because of famines and social upheavals, came for the most part from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia." In the first quarter of the twentieth century, immigration into the United States reached a high peak, with 17 million people (mostly Italian, Poles, and Jews from Central and Eastern Europe) entering the country. This last wave of immigration ended in the 1920s, when America set in place legislative restrictions aimed at stemming the flow of immigrants. But, since the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, which abolished the national quota system set in place by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1920, more than 20 million immigrants have entered the United States, half of whom arrived during the 1980s, mostly from countries in Asia and Latin America. In fact, from "1980-1993 European immigrants were only 13 percent of the 20 million immigrants that have entered the country whereas those from Asia were 39 percent and those from Latin America (including the Caribbean) were 43 percent" (Shankar and Mendoza xiii-xxvi).[1]

A growing number of immigrants are also arriving from Africa. According to figures from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), the number of African immigrants to the United States more than quadrupled in the last two decades of the twentieth century – from 109,733 between

1961 and 1980 to 531,832 between 1981 and 2000. The number of African immigrants in the United States grew 40-fold between 1960 and 2007, from 35,355 to 1.4 million. Most of this growth has taken place since 1990. The new literature of immigration therefore "overwhelmingly deals with the experiences of people who are not from Europe or of European descent" (Shankar and Mendoza xiii-xxvi).[2]

My aim in this essay is not to provide an exhaustive review of this literature. Rather, focusing on Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996), *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007), and two earlier texts, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), a classic immigrant narrative, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* (1953), a text that is rarely discussed as an immigrant narrative per se, I explore significant shifts in the tropes and aesthetic form of recent American immigrant fiction.

Race is a significant topic in this new literature. As Shankar and Mendoza note, "American history no doubt shows that the racial category of 'white' is contingent and evolving, so that at various points in American history, the whiteness of the Irish or the Jew was a matter of some contestation; nevertheless, it is safe to say that race is an altogether more complicated and important issue in the new literature of immigration" (xxi). America's investment in race, its often violent and tragic history of oppression of Native peoples, African Americans, and immigrants of color, has produced dual tendencies in recent immigrant writing. On the one hand, the new literature of immigration is often more critical of the United States than the older literature, arguably because new immigrants come from countries with long experiences of colonialism and neocolonialism, sometimes at the hands of Americans. On the other, recent immigrant literature also finds inspiration in the struggle for racial equality forged by African Americans and their allies, even as it questions the white-black binary that has dominated American racial discourse for centuries.

The growing number of immigrants arriving from Africa has already begun to challenge historically embedded racial dynamics and nomenclature. "African, American," the *New York Times* review of Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* suggests as much through its title alone. Traditionally, immigrants have adopted hyphenated names to signal their simultaneous Americanization and continued allegiance to their country of

birth. But what does one call an African immigrant who has also become American? African American is not an option that comes without confusion since that is the term currently in use to designate black Americans of African descent who have been in the country for several generations, some, significantly, through the nation's violent history of chattel slavery, and even further back, since the nation's beginnings (Nixon).[3] Similarly, immigrants from the Caribbean, and other countries of Latin America where the slave trade had significant impact, challenge American racial categories since their racial identity is neither black nor white, at least not in the ways that Americans have historically defined these terms.

But, as Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* shows, beyond questioning racial nomenclature, the arrival of African immigrants, and immigrants of other "non-white" countries, has also produced immigrant fiction that challenges the traditional focus in immigrant texts on the process of assimilation and that often blurs the distinction between "immigrant" and "exile." Mengestu's novel focuses on Sepha Stephanos, a young man who is exiled from Ethiopia after witnessing the murder of his father during the country's Red Terror. At the time of the novel's opening, it has been seventeen years since Sepha fled Addis Ababa for Washington, D.C., in which time he has become the owner of a struggling grocery store in Logan Circle, a neighborhood until quite recently inhabited only by the poor and the dark. But, rather than detail the process of Sepha's Americanization, Mengestu poignantly renders how haunted Sepha remains, how unable he is to separate his new life from the memories of his father's tragic end. "In those days I believed it was only a matter of weeks or months before I returned home to Ethiopia," Sepha writes of his first years in America, adding, "How was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia?" (140). As Rob Nixon puts it, the novel is about the "animate presence of loss, about a man struggling to find traction in his ostensibly current life." The "deeply felt pain in Mengestu's novel," Nixon adds, "is offset by the solace of friendship – whether it's a friendship that hovers on the verge of romance, a friendship between an adult and a child or, above all, the friendships that steady the daily lives of fellow immigrants." And, indeed, the novel opens by introducing Sepha and his intimate friends, Joseph from the Congo, and Kenneth from Kenya, whom he first meets

at a hotel where they work as bellhops. Sepha and his friends are unlike African immigrants of the 1960s and 70s, whose primary objective was to obtain an American education before returning home to contribute to the task of nation-building. Instead, Sepha and his friends are part of the more recent wave of African immigrants, who are mainly refugees and asylum seekers escaping the ravages of civil wars and political persecution in their homelands.[4]

Like Mengestu's novel, Díaz's *Drown*, a book of short stories, and his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* blur between the categories of "immigrant" and "exile," while presenting a challenge to traditional views of Americanization. The stories in *Drown* shuttle between the Dominican Republic and the United States (New Jersey), and revolve around family dramas intensified by the losses of immigrant uprooting: poverty in American ghettoes, the drugs that infest them, and the lack of opportunity and depression suffered by its inhabitants. The focus of the stories is thus not on the trials and tribulations of immigrants gaining a better life in America. Rather, the stories emphasize the connections between life in the country of origin and in the United States, where immigrants face a number of hardships that are not easily, if ever, surmounted, especially since crises in economic and political power have weakened the promise that America once represented. Nonetheless, these stories, like much recent immigrant fiction, highlight the fact that, despite the economic, legal, and racial oppression that limit their mobility, immigrants are no longer "forced to make choices about conforming to their new home without contact with the land of origin, and they are somewhat freed from expectations and external pressures to conflate identity with nation" (Friedman 72). Part of this development has to do with technological innovation in travel (in the early nineteenth century, European immigrants had to travel for six weeks just to cross the Atlantic). But, as Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shows, the increasingly intertwined relationship between country of origin and new home is also due to the history of neocolonialism, a history that also produces the blurring between the categories "immigrant" and "exile."

Told from the perspective of Yunior, a character from *Drown*, Díaz's novel focuses on the lives of two first-generation Americans, Lola, Yunior's

one time girlfriend, and her younger brother, Oscar, but traces their origins to the Dominican Republic through their mother's narrative, which Díaz places at the core of the novel. The story of this mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral, "a girl … so dark it was if the Creatrix had, in her making, blinked" (77), entails surviving a brutal beating in a cane-field at the time of the Trujillo dictatorship and her subsequent exile to the United States. Orchestrated by the dictator's sister, the beating is part personal revenge, but it is also evidence of the extreme racism suffered by black people under Trujillo.[5] Díaz is a novelist firmly rooted in the specificities of Dominican history. Yet, far from focusing myopically on the topic, he expertly shows the ways in which the African Diaspora, U.S. imperialism, and the exodus of Dominicans to the U.S. (caused largely by the U.S.-backed Trujillo dictatorship) are interrelated. The many footnotes that accompany his novel serve as the principal lens into Dominican history, specifically to the history of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, the "pig-eyed mulatto who bleached his skin" and who ruled the Dominican Republic in a dictatorship that lasted between 1930 and 1961 (2). At its conclusion, the novel circles back to the Dominican Republic, where Oscar is murdered in a beating similar to the one his mother survived. The novel thus traces not only the factors that produced the exile of Oscar's family but also how the past shadows and shapes the present.

Among the most distinguishing characteristics of Díaz's novel is its aesthetic virtuosity as it ranges across an impressive number of genres, styles, and referent points. As A.O. Scott puts it, the novel, including its numerous footnotes, encompasses a "multigenerational immigrant family chronicle that dabbles in tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, post-postmodern pyrotechnics and enough polymorphous multiculturalism to fill up an Introduction to Cultural Studies syllabus." In its richness, Díaz's novel exemplifies a trend in recent immigrant fiction towards formal experimentation that departs from the largely autobiographical focus of earlier immigrant fiction.[6] Such formal experimentation had earlier antecedents, as will be clear in the next section, which focuses on Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*.

Call it Sleep and *Drown*

In his review of *Drown*, literary critic James Wood compares Díaz to Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, arguing that they represent opposed narrative and linguistic strategies in their representation of U.S. immigration. In Roth's *Call it Sleep*, the narrator describes David's (the novel's young hero) and his mother's awe as they arrive by boat to Manhattan in 1907 and see Lady Liberty: "And before them rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty.... [T]o those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane.... The child and his mother stared again at this massive figure in wonder" (14). Wood contrasts this scene, which he calls "luminously unyielding," to a similar scene in *Drown*, in which a young man and a young woman from the Dominican Republic cross the George Washington Bridge from New Jersey into Manhattan and have the following interchange:

> Is this the best way? she asks. The bridge doesn't seem to impress her.
>
> It's the shortest way.
>
> [A moment later]:
>
> I want to ask her if she loves her boss, but ask instead, How do you like the States?
>
> She swings her head across at the billboards. I am not surprised by any of it, she says. (Díaz 136-37)

For Wood, immigrants' diminished hopes and the familiar Americanization of the world do not suffice to explain the gap between the wonder in Roth's book and the apathy in Díaz's. I argue that, to the contrary, the immigrants whose lives Díaz fictionalizes have had too close a relationship to America to be in awe of it. Their country bears the marks of repeated and violent acts of colonization in which America has participated (not only by twice invading and occupying the country) but also by supporting the Trujillo regime, which caused much of the Dominican immigration to the United States. In *Drown* Díaz expresses the disenchantment of recent immigrants with regard to the United States, while also trying to create a new form of immigrant literature, one that does not cater to stereotypical

conventions about immigrant hopes and dreams in the land of milk and honey. His sensibility is much more like that of Groucho Marx, who was fond of playing with the old saying that American streets are paved with gold: when immigrants get here, Marx would say, they learn first that the streets are not paved with gold; second, that the streets are not paved at all; and third, that they are expected to pave them.[7]

In *Drown*, Díaz guards against the kind of commoditization of the immigrant tale and the reduction of the immigrant to type, which was in evidence in the multicultural turn in late-twentieth-century America. With the canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s and the rise of multiculturalism, immigrant literature saw remarkable market success. Yet some of that success needs to be re-examined since it constituted a suspicious commoditization of ethnic difference. Take for instance prominent authors in the nascent Latina/o canon, the work of Sandra Cisneros, Richard Rodriguez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Esmeralda Santiago, Cristina García and Julia Alvarez, among others, which became staples in multiculturalist syllabi. Attention to the immigrant or ethnic experience as represented in texts by these authors tended to be underwritten by identity politics. As Raphel Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez argue, the multiculturalist turn of the late twentieth century was largely based on a politics of "cultural translation," and often billed itself as "building bridges," offering each author as translator, native informant, or representative subject. "Multiculturalist readings," they argue, "highlight diversity as an end unto itself, with hybridity serving as a mode of politics that challenges the purity of Americanness by transforming the homogeneity of the mainstream. The flipside, of course, is that this challenge to the mainstream entails the consumption of Latino/a identity as yet another flavor in the multicultural stew" (4).

One of the clearest ways in which recent immigrant writers have assumed the role of cultural translators is in their cosmetic use or neglect of Spanish. Both Gustavo Pérez Firmat and Lyn Di Iorio Sandín have argued that, with few exceptions, writers of Latin American descent have "killed" Spanish in order not to alienate their largely white and monolingual readership.[8] In doing so, they have refused to engage in what James Wood considers to be the "traditional project of immigrant literature," which is that of "breaking the old verbal vessels."

In his review of *Drown*, Wood praises Roth's book for fulfilling this project because *Call it Sleep* is full of Polish-English rhythms, Yiddish-English rhythms, slices of Irish speech and phonetic accents that Roth labors to accent on every page. Praising Díaz only for having a "quick, skinned, craftily alive" prose, Wood claims that in *Drown*, the "language is remarkably unmarked by Spanish" and argues that Díaz "shows very little interest in doing something new with the [English] language." Wood argues that the traditional project of immigrant literature is in fact not available to Díaz, "partly because the verbal vessel [English] is not intact to be broken;" the verbal vessel "is already in pieces." "Díaz paddles in remnants," Wood concludes, "abandoning something that he does not possess anyway" (I wonder what Wood means, Spanish? or English?). Yet in *Drown*, Díaz's relationship to languages reflect his refusal of the role of translator and native informant, experimenting with Spanish and English in ways that will find fuller, richer expression in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Díaz's attained his first taste of notoriety when he began to publish short fiction in *The New Yorker*, where he fought hard not to italicize Spanish words or to provide a glossary. He persuaded the editors of the magazine and since then has continued to use Spanish – in its variety, especially within the cultural context of the Dominican Republic – as an integral and never-italicized part of his narrative style. Here is the opening paragraph of *Drown*, from the story "Ysrael":

> We are on our way to the colmado for an errand, a beer for my tío, when Rafa stood still and titled his head, as if listening to a message I couldn't hear, something beamed in from afar. We were close to the colmado; you could hear the music and the gentle clop of drunken voices. I was nine that summer, but my brother was twelve, and he was the one who wanted to see Ysrael, who looked out towards Barbacoa and said, We should pay that kid a visit (3).

As the opening of a book, this passage invites the reader in part through its use of Spanish words, all of which are easily decipherable, and the "message" which we set out to discover with the narrator. In other passages, where the Spanish words are more challenging to the non-Spanish speaker,

Diaz's stories do, as Wood admits, turn the reader into a kind of immigrant, one who may figure out meanings from context but who may also remain unable to decipher them. This capacity to enact the immigrant experience *in language* for the reader is one of the most significant accomplishments of Díaz's work.

Rather than see Díaz as an impoverished version of Roth, as Wood does, we can see that in this respect Díaz is updating a strategy that Roth developed in *Call it Sleep*. Roth's novel offers three intricately intertwined levels of narration: one, which is experiential and rendered through its main protagonist, David, who is a child; another, which is that of the narrator, is one that orders the impression of the experiencing self; and last, the authorial perspective which is that of the omniscient author who operates between realist and modernist prose. The novel also includes three types of languages: direct translation of Yiddish into English (which Roth translated into an expressive, malleable, and poetic English), a dialect that is neither English nor Yiddish (which Roth transcribed into a laborious dialect that is often incomprehensible until read aloud), and the accented English or languages of other immigrant groups. As Werner Sollors notes, the interchange among these different levels of language is dynamic:

> Roth represents the Jewish immigrants' Yiddish as *good* English – for Roth a highly stylized and lyrical language – and their English as broken English. This procedure suggests an inner world of richness and lyrical expression, a full range of feelings and words that might remain hidden to an English-only reader were it not for the narrator's meditation. In the 'broken English' sections, however, Yiddish words do enter into the text, at times with the humorous effect of a bilingual pun. (*Ethnic Modernism* 144)

Roth also thematizes the importance of language to the experience and the representation of immigration. Acquiring a new language or not knowing an old one creates riffs in intimacy between child and mother, husband and wife, or humiliation, as David repeatedly discovers. But Roth enacts these tensions in the very language of the novel. In the following scene, where David approaches three boys burning a fire in the street, the boys' dialect interacts energetically with authorial commentary:

"Yeah, dis is our fiuh."

"Aintchuh gonna led me boin mine? I only god one liddle one.'

"No!"

"Make yuh own fiuh."

"Gwan if yuh ain' god a penny, we don't wan yuh lousy chumitz –"

A sudden scraping sound followed by a snarl of foreign words, made them all spin about.

"Mannagia chi ti battiavo!"

The broad, glitter-edged, half laden shovel of a white-garbed street cleaner plowed toward them. (243. Book III, VII)

The "snarl of foreign words," against the "broken English" of the street boys and the fine modernist line describing the street cleaner's shovel exemplifies the dynamism of Roth's prose. While Roth creates a cacophony of sound in this interplay of languages, he offers translated Yiddish in a stylized English that allows the reader entry into the language's richness. In an exemplary instance, a rabbi scolds a misbehaving boy, providing entry into the strange pleasures of Biblical-style condemnation: "'May your skull be dark!' the rabbi intoned in short frenzied yelps, 'and your eyes be dark and your fate be such dearth and darkness that you will call a poppy-seed the sun and a carroway the moon. Get up! Away! Or I'll empty my bitter heart upon you!'" (216).

Pnin and *Oscar Wao*

The way that Díaz experiments with different registers of language in *Drown* is much more reserved. As James Wood notes, the stories present a mixture of "non-literary vernacular, compounded by African American slang, loosened Spanish and standard American short storytelling (a la Raymond Carver)." Here Wood refers to Carver's sparseness, his terse prose and Hemingway-like inclination towards omission. Like Roth, Díaz enacts the dynamism of different languages and dialects as they mix in contemporary immigrant fiction. But he does so in a style that expresses a more aloof attitude towards the experience of being an immigrant in America than

Roth's protagonists, who called America the "Golden Land"(11). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz experiments with different registers of language and perspective in a way that is similar in its energy to Roth's own experimentation. But in the novel Díaz highlights the comedic and tragicomic aspects of the immigrant experience in a way that is closer to the sensibility of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*. A novel about a portly, bald, and middle-aged professor who teaches Russian at "Waindell," an American university where he has found refuge after fleeing Red Russia first for Europe and finally for America, *Pnin* is not, as I already mentioned, often considered under the rubric of immigrant fiction (perhaps because Nabokov's playful style fiercely challenged easy categorization). But the novel, in style and sensibility, offers another rich precursor to Díaz's fiction.

A key aspect of the novel is Pnin's inventive use of English. He is beloved by his students, "not for any essential ability" but for his "[n]ostalgic excursions in broken English" about his past and immigrant present ("How Pnin came to the *Soedinyonnïe Shtatï* (the United States) …") (11). And he is beloved by many readers, this one included, for the warm humor that his broken English produces, which nevertheless evokes the pain of being "evicted" from a "mother tongue," and forced into the "distorting medium" of an "unelected second language" (Besemeres 390). "A special danger in Pnin's case was the English language," writes Nabokov, except "for such not very helpful odds and ends as the 'rest is silence,' 'nevermore,' 'weekend,' 'who's who,' and a few ordinary words like 'eat,' 'street,' 'fountain pen,' 'gangster,' 'Charleston,' 'marginal utility,' he had no English at all at the time he left France for the States." Then there is also the comedy born out of Pnin's attitude towards his immigrant condition: "he was perhaps too wary, too persistently on the lookout for diabolical pitfalls, too painfully on the alert lest his erratic surroundings (unpredictable America) inveigle him into some bit of preposterous oversight. *It was the world that was absent-minded and it was Pnin whose business it was to set it straight*" (my emphasis) (13). To those around him, with the exception of his students, Pnin seems like an odd ball: at best "a happy footnote-drugged maniac who disturbs the book mites in a dull volume, a foot thick, to find in it a reference to an even duller one," and at worst, a "freak," "a cracked ping-pong ball" (143, 32). And yet, for Pnin it is the world that is skewed.

While aspects of Pnin are decidedly comic, Nabokov also highlights the pathos of Pnin's exile, ultimately making him an empathetic figure.[9] At the same time, Nabokov, like Díaz, uses a terse style to represent paradigmatic scenes in Pnin's immigrant experience. Here, for instance, is the scene describing Pnin's first view of the Statue of Liberty: "And at last, when the great statue arose from the morning haze where, ready to be ignited by the sun, pale, spellbound buildings stood like those mysterious rectangles of unequal height that you see in the bar graph representations of compared percentages (natural resources, the frequency of mirages in different deserts." The first part of Nabokov's sentence clearly recalls Roth's "luminously unyielding" prose in describing a similar scene. And yet the second phrase, with its graphs and percentages, deflates the possibility of exaltation, bringing to mind Díaz's refusal to dramatize the moment of arrival in rich language.

Nabokov's mixture of comedy and tragedy in his representation of Pnin's exile and immigration resonate with Díaz's style in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Like the title character of *Pnin*, Oscar Wao is a misfit: he is a sweet but overweight nerd who falls in love easily and deeply but unsuccessfully, and who dreams of becoming a science fiction writer. Oscar is ostracized not only because he does not behave according to the ultra machismo or coolness of his Dominican or African American peers, but also because he does not fit in either black or white America. Yunior describes what happens when Oscar begins college: "The White kids looked at his Black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body shook their head. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again. But I am. Soy Dominicano. Dominicano soy" (49). Oscar's nerdiness provides Díaz with various opportunities to elicit the kind empathy-inducing humor with which Nabokov portrays Pnin. But Díaz also underscores the tragic aspects of Oscar's life, locating his murder in the context of his mother's persecution long before his family's immigrant experience in America, and poignantly rendering his struggles as a dreamer in a strange, and unforgiving land.

Like Roth, Díaz creates his novel out of a dynamic interplay with various languages, providing diverse points of privileged entry. He includes a much more active interplay between Spanish and English than he does in

Drown, highlighting his use of specific Dominican versions of Spanish and black urban slang while introducing languages and allusions derived from science fiction and comic books along with a kind of academic nerd-speak rich in literary references (Díaz is a tenured professor at M.I.T.). As I have already noted, the novel is a multigenerational immigrant family story, but it is also one that is framed by the stories of two writers – Yunior, whose reliability as a narrator is decidedly questionable, and Oscar, whose writing we only read about. This framing serves Díaz to complicate any easy analysis of the novel's plot and to highlight ethical and metanarrative questions regarding the aesthetic representation of exile, immigration, and loss.

He also places these experiences in a wide historical context. The novel opens with a discussion of what Díaz humorously calls the "Fukú Americanus," or the curse that afflicts Oscar's family (in its history of persecution) and all of us in the Americas, given the massacre and devastation that the birth of the New World entailed. "They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved," writes Díaz in the opening line of the novel, "that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began" (1). This invocation of the African Diaspora and death of the Native American people haunts the lives of all those living in the Americas and frames Oscar's brief life. In less able hands this set up might seem preposterous: what does the story of a forlorn ghetto nerd, and his immigrant family, have to do with massive historical dramas? Díaz offers the proposition with a healthy dose of humor but he also seriously proposes that history is not only the grand dramas of dictators and the theater of war and repression that they orchestrate but also the lives of the common people whose lives they shape. The story of Oscar's mother's exile, her immigration, and Oscar's ultimate return to her point of departure are thus part of a tapestry of struggle and survival. More specifically, their stories are deeply connected to Trujillo who is deeply connected to the Curse. As Yunior writes, "No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's servant or its master, its agent or its principal," then, casually using African American slang concludes, "but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them too was *tight*" (3).

Díaz uses the fantastical language of science fiction and the hyperbolic verbal gestures of black barbershops and barrio corners to represent Trujillo. Alluding to major villains in fantasy genres and comic books, Yunior

writes that for Dominicans Trujillo "was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up" (2). Díaz interweaves the different modes of expression that Yunior uses seamlessly. Again, Spanish is never italicized or translated nor are the fantasy genre and comic book references explained. Fact is indeed stranger than fiction as Trujillo supercedes even the most fantastical characters in Yunior's hyperbolic comparisons, which also include his use of the casual language of the streets. Yet the informality of Yunior's modes of expression does not detract from the seriousness of his topic. The Curse, as William Deresiewicz notes, is a "kind of colonial Original Sin" that shapes the histories and contemporary cultures of all of the Americas (Puerto Rico, Peru, Mexico, Cuba are among the many other countries in the continent that become frequent points of reference throughout the novel) (37-8). Díaz challenges the reader to stay balanced between the two poles that he constructs: between the obviously fictional modes he employs to render a story that is stranger than the most outlandish fiction and the irresolute materiality of the history of which the fiction makes use.

If the Curse descends upon the poor, the dark, the disenfranchised, it also destroys those who might seem to be shielded from it by power and fame. In fact, Yunior suggests that the curse that seems to afflict the Kennedy family might in fact be connected to the Curse itself. John F. Kennedy was the one who "green-lighted the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, who ordered the CIA to deliver arms to the Island" (3). And what happened to him and his family? Keeping the mixture of humor and seriousness that he maintains throughout his discussion of the Curse, Yunior argues that Kennedy was killed by the Fukú:

> For what Kennedy's intelligence experts failed to tell him was what every single Dominican, from the richest jibao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmacorisano to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew: that whoever killed Trujillo, their family would suffer a fukú so dreadful it would make the one that attached itself to the Admiral jojote in comparison. (3)

William Deresiewicz rightly highlights this passage as exemplary of the "audacity, bounce and brio" of Díaz's "bilingualism," which aggres-

sively shifts the power balance away from monolingual readers (39-40). This shifting also informs Díaz's challenge to hackneyed ideas regarding immigrants. In this passage, for instance, he locates Dominicans in San Francisco, expanding the scope of the Dominican diaspora well beyond New York and the North in general, and identifies more power in common peoples' knowledge than in that of intelligence experts. The pleasure of language is evident to all, however, in Díaz's rhymes ("jibao in Mao") and especially evident for those able to fully appreciate how seamlessly Díaz intertwines English and Spanish.

The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears

While Díaz uses this rich interplay of languages to represent contemporary American immigration, Dinaw Mengestu enacts a different set of strategies in *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. In a style that lends itself to reflection and mourning, Mengestu seems to respond to the challenge proposed by Chinese American author Ha Jin, who writes: the "most significant literature dealing with human migration has been written on the experience of exile. By contrast, immigration is a minor theme, mainly American. Therefore, a major challenge for writers of the immigrant experience is how to treat this subject in response to the greater literary traditions" (11). Mengestu makes use of a rich array of literary references to movingly represent the inextricability of the two themes. A reference to V.S. Naipaul's *The Bend in the River* (1979), for instance, swiftly invokes the pain of Sepha's exile, of his suspended and stagnant life between his tragic past and his inert present, between Africa and America. Sepha, who reads "one book every two days," while he takes care of his struggling grocery store, finds refuge in fiction, sharing his love for the beauty and recognition that he finds therein with his small circle of friends (40). He reads Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, meditating on the political persecution Dostoevsky suffered and thus bringing to mind Ovid who, in *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, grieved his own exile as if it had been a death. Dante's exit from the *Inferno*, invoked in the novel's title, and quoted midway through the novel, invokes both the pain suffered by Africans at the hands of its various dictators ("Hell

every day with only glimpses of heaven in between," says Sepha's friend Joseph) and the hope of deliverance (100).

In a carefully measured and subtle style, Mengestu brings alive the humor and comradeship of immigrants in the "sanctuary of their own company, free from the exhausting courtesies of self-anthropologizing explanation" (Nixon). At the store, after hours, he and his African friends play a memory game in front of an old, tattered map of Africa: "Name a dictator and then guess the year and country" (8). "We've been playing the game for over a year," writes Sepha, noting that the group expands the game to include "failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as [they] can find." There "are always more, the names, dates, and years multiplying as fast as we can memorize them," he adds, "so that at times, we wonder half-jokingly, if perhaps we ourselves aren't somewhat responsible" (8). If to name is to create, then the group's game may not be as passive a form of release as it might seem. Like Yunior, the group creatively responds to the pain of history by highlighting absurdity. Referring to the various dictators they name, Sepha writes:

> We have our favorites. Bukassa. Amin. Mobutu. We love the ones known for their absurd declarations and comical performances, the dictators who marry forty women and have twice as many children, who sit on golden thrones shaped like eagles, declare themselves minor gods, and are surrounded by rumors of incest, cannibalism, sorcery, magic. (8)

Underlying the humor the men share in their observations is their deeply felt pathos, which Mengestu renders in an understated style that sometimes bursts into direct and bold expression: "I did not come to America to find a better life," Sepha writes, "I came here running and screaming with the ghost of an old one firmly attached to my back" (41). It is a testament to Mengestu's virtuosity that the novel intertwines Sepha's plight with other narrative plots that are firmly rooted in Washington, D.C., including that of a white woman and her biracial child, who move to Sepha's neighborhood in a process of gentrification that ultimately goes awry but that brings Sepha face to face with the necessity to change his stagnant life.

As we have seen then, Díaz and Mengestu represent two diverse voices in contemporary American immigrant literature. There are, of course, a variety of other voices I have not been able to consider here. My aim has been to engage in an exploration of two of the most innovative artists in this fiction and of two of their precursors. My emphasis on formal innovation, in this essay and elsewhere, seeks to challenge the tendency in scholarship on immigrant literature towards emphasizing its sociological and historical aspects at the expense of its artistry. Here I am too following a groundbreaking predecessor. As early as 1989, scholar Werner Sollors questioned the study of ethnic literature, including immigrant fiction, as an "authentic" expression of minority groups. As he notes, ethnic groups "are typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units" and are studied in a "group-by-group approach" (so that, for instance, Asian-American literature is isolated from Latina/o literature or separated by even smaller units, as in Chicano, or Puerto Rican-American fiction). This approach, Sollors argues, emphasizes "'authenticity' and cultural heritage within the individual, somewhat idealized group at the expense of more widely shared historical conditions and cultural features, of dynamic interaction and syncretism." Instead, Sollors views ethnic literature as "a *productive force*, to the emergence and maintenance of communities" ("Introduction" xiv), and approaches it from a comparative stance (my emphasis). Across various texts, including his *Ethnic Modernism*, which I quoted earlier in this essay, Sollors has focused on the stylistic interventions of immigrant literature. In this essay I have followed his footsteps, exploring the formal innovation of recent publications in that rich literature.

Notes

[1] This anthology includes several prominent titles of recent American immigrant writing though it focuses mostly on memoirs.

[2] The top individual countries of origin of African-born immigrants are Nigeria, Egypt, and Ethiopia.

[3] See also, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/29/national/29african.html>.

[4] Recent African immigrants are also highly skilled professionals disappointed by the worsening economic situation in many African states. See <http://www.migrationinfor-

mation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=847>.

[5] The beating clearly recalls the massacre of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans carried out by Trujillo in 1934.

[6] Earlier titles include but are not limited to Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912), Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Lavinsky* (1917), Anzia Yezierska, *Children of Loneliness: Stories of Immigrant Life in America* (1923), Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers: A Novel: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (1925), Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (1930), Louis Adamic, *Laughing in the Jungle: The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America* (1932). For a discussion of representative texts in recent immigrant fiction, see Veale.

[7] For a discussion of this trend in recent immigrant fiction, see Sachs.

[8] See Pérez-Firmat Sandín.

[9] Lopate suggests that Pnin may be empathetic for some readers "because American intellectuals secretly regard themselves as permanent immigrants or 'resident aliens' in the dominant popular culture, trying to uphold values from an older, increasingly discarded way of being."

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